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ALAMO BAY AND THE GOOK SYNDROME

HENRY J. LASKOWSKY

At the very beginning of my course on the literature of the Vietnam War I often ask students to give me their impressions of the war as part of American history. Except for the occasional veteran or returning student, most confess to having little detailed knowledge about the origins and conduct of the war, but nevertheless agree on the perception that it was some sort of aberration—an anomaly in America's proud history of fighting on the side of virtue. One reason for enrolling in the course to begin with, they say, is the impression that the war constitutes a kind of grey area, or perhaps even a patch of darkness in the otherwise bright narrative of our military history. The many popular contemporary films, books, and television productions about Vietnam paint a picture of a morally ambiguous struggle.

My students are well prepared to deal with the war's uniqueness; what they are not prepared to do is to see what happened in Vietnam as part of an historical pattern, a chain of events which culminates in Vietnam and which reveals a developing pattern of racist behavior.. To understand the specific assumptions of those Americans who went to Vietnam or those who created policy at home, we must become aware of the historical precedents for those attitudes as applied to blacks, Latinos, and Asians within our own borders. Additionally, it is important to review the development of racist beliefs during our westward expansion as we first fought American Indians and then crossed the Pacific to fight Filipinos before sending troops into Vietnam. One of the ways I have been able to get my students to begin thinking about such complicated matters is to show them the film *Alamo Bay*. In this essay, I will show the relevance of this film to an understanding of the nature and roots of American racism in Vietnam.

When James Madison wrote in 1826 that, "next to the case of the black race within our bosom, that of the red on our borders is the problem most baffling to the policy of our country," he could not have foreseen how much more complicated America's racial problems would become by the end of the century.¹ After annexing Hawaii in July of 1898, the United States acquired Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines from Spain for approximately \$20 million in December of the same year. President McKinley had been undecided about

whether or not he really wanted to buy the Philippines, and finally made his decision by going down on his knees to pray for guidance from God. What God told him was that it would be "bad business" to turn them over to France and Germany, "our commercial rivals in the Orient," but that "we could not leave them to themselves," since "they were unfit for self government." Therefore, "there was nothing left to do but take them all and educate the Filipinos, and uplift, and civilize, and Christianize them."² The Philippine people, however, saw things differently and by 1899, under Emilio Aguinaldo, they rose in revolt against their new American rulers, as they had risen under the Spanish occupation. After three years of war and the commitment of 70,000 American troops, the US crushed the rebellion, but by then a pattern of racist thought and action had been established which would reassert itself another half of a century later in Indochina.

Faced with a non-white, non-Western group of rebels, military and civilian officials responsible for subjugating the people of the Philippines quickly adapted the logic and the procedures used to conquer the American Indian, and turned them to use against the "savage" Philippine tribes. Like the American Indian, the Philippine people were considered by most Americans to be less than human. McKinley's advisor, Professor D.C. Worcester, had concocted a racial classification of the Philippine people and was put in charge of the Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes under various American governors of the Philippines. He wrote in a 1913 issue of *National Geographic* that the "Negrito" (Filipino) race ranked "not far above the anthropoid apes," and that "they are a link which is not missing but soon will be! In my opinion, they are absolutely incapable of civilization."³ Theodore Roosevelt, who in 1900 was McKinley's running mate, observed that, "to grant self-government to Luzon under Aguinaldo would be like granting self-government to an Apache reservation under some local chief," and went on to say "the reasoning which justifies our having made war against Sitting Bull also justifies our having checked the outbreaks of Aguinaldo and his followers."⁴

In the field, old Indian fighters such as Generals Franklin Bell and Jacob H. "Hell Roaring" Smith used the same tactics on the Philippine rebels as they had used on American Indians, including the destruction of entire towns and villages, the massacre of men, women, and children, and the burning of crops. Later court martialed for ordering the murder of eleven prisoners, General Smith, according to the trial records, gave the following orders to his troops: "I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn; the more you kill and burn the better you will please me." He wished "the interior of Samar [to] be made a howling wilderness."⁵ Nor was theological justification for pursuing an "Indian war" against the rebels lacking; according to James W. Thoburn, Bishop of the Methodist Church for India and

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Malaysia, the Philippine people were "very much...like our American Indians...treacherous in their character."⁶

The rationalization for brutal treatment was displayed to every American in 1904, when the St. Louis World's Fair of that year presented absolute "proof" of the racial inferiority of America's native peoples and those of the Philippines by placing both Geronimo and a group of Philippine Igorots on exhibit to satisfy the curiosity of those "civilized" Americans who would pay to view them.

If the American Indian provided the clearest analogy to the Filipino for those Americans who came to conquer and civilize the natives, it is also true that American history had provided an alternative way of identifying the inhabitants of those islands. According to Howard Zinn, "between 1889 and 1903, on the average, every week, two Negroes were lynched by mobs—hanged, burned, mutilated."⁷ Since the Colonial period it had been American policy to treat blacks as a sub-human race undeserving of the protections and rights guaranteed to white men by law. This disregard for the humanity and dignity of blacks was easily extended to the dark-skinned people of the Philippines. All Filipinos were called "niggers" by white American soldiers, and were sometimes murdered for no other reason than that their skins were brown. According to a correspondent for the Philadelphia *Ledger*, writing in November, 1901:

The present war is no bloodless, opera *bouffe* engagement; our men have been relentless, have killed to exterminate men, women, children, prisoners and captives, active insurgents and suspected people from lads of ten up, the idea prevailing that the Filipino as such was little better than a dog.... Our soldiers have pumped salt water into men to make them talk, and have taken prisoner people who held up their hands and peacefully surrendered, and an hour later, without an atom of evidence to show that they were even *insurrectos*, stood them on a bridge and shot them down one by one, to drop into the water below and float down, as examples to those who found their bullet-loaded corpses.⁸

Typically an American soldier could write home that, "Our fighting blood was up, and we all wanted to kill 'niggers'.... This shooting human beings beats rabbit hunting all to pieces."⁹

The language and attitudes of the white American soldiers created an enormous problem for the soldiers who constituted the four black regiments on duty in the Philippines. Many black soldiers resented the term "nigger" when it was used by white troops to describe the Filipinos, and there was an unusually high desertion rate for black soldiers, some of whom joined the rebels and fought against the American army.¹⁰ Thus, Patrick Mason, a black soldier in the 24th

Infantry could write to the *Cleveland Gazette*:

Dear Sir: I have not had any fighting to do since I have been here and don't care to do any. I feel sorry for these people and all that have come under the control of the United States. I don't believe they will be justly dealt by. The first thing in the morning is the "Nigger" and the last thing at night is the "Nigger"....¹¹

Other black soldiers joined with the whites in calling Filipinos "goo-goos"; the origin of the term is unclear, but it was obviously developed to describe these people—neither Negro nor Indian—who nonetheless did not deserve the privileges due to those with white skins. The complexity and magnitude of American racism in the Philippines is further signified by the fact that black soldiers sometimes took Filipino women as lovers and wives and called them "squaws."¹²

Approximately sixty years later, when American troops crossed the South China Sea which separates the Philippines from Vietnam, they came to replace the French as we had replaced the Spanish in Manila at the turn of the century. The essential features of our Philippine occupation would be repeated as in a recurring nightmare. Once again, villages would be burned, crops destroyed, people displaced; men, women and children would be massacred. Because of advancements in American war technology, Americans in Vietnam were able to wreak terrible damage upon the peasant peoples and cultures of Vietnam (as well as the surrounding countries of Laos and Cambodia), killing at least two million Vietnamese (approximately 58,000 American died) and devastating the land with millions of tons of bombs and chemical defoliants.

On the ground, American soldiers would speak of land occupied by the Viet Cong as "Indian country," and many would try to emulate the mythic American hero and Indian fighter as portrayed by John Wayne. Blacks once again found themselves in the confusing position of being required to kill people of color while their own status as victims of racism was made clear to them by white reaction to the civil-rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Vietnamese "gooks" replaced Philippine "goo-goos" as the victims of white racist aggression, and it was frequently stated by American soldiers that "the only good gook is a dead gook." Once again, the history of America's racism was shaping America's military encounter with an alien group of people; only this time, approximately 3 million Americans would become involved in that complex of racial attitudes which Robert Lifton has called "the gook syndrome."

shrimp wholesaler, who has employed other Vietnamese because



Burial of the dead at Wounded Knee, New Years Day, 1891. Photo by GI Trager, Nebraska State Historical Society.

The word "gook" has two primary definitions in the *American Heritage Dictionary*: 1) "A dirty, sludgy, or slimy substance;" and, 2) "An Oriental." Like those other derogatory terms, "dink" and "slope," the word "gook" referred to *all* Vietnamese and not merely the National Liberation Front and the North Vietnamese Army against whom American soldiers fought. The transference of hatred from a particular enemy to all people of a given race is a necessary precursor to massacres, such as the one at My Lai, where civilians of all ages were slaughtered by American troops. A soldier at My Lai is reported to have said:

I hate the gooks—in terms you can actually understand. I hate them a whole lot. That means I hate them worse than anybody does.... And of course the only way you could determine who hated them the most was how many times you beat them or killed them or raped them or something like that.¹³

Ingrained patterns of racism made it easy for American soldiers to transfer blame for the horrors and absurdities of the Vietnam war onto the Vietnamese, making them scapegoats for Americans who were not able to conceive of the idea—let alone acknowledge the fact—that they



Burial of the dead at Santa Ana, February 5, 1899. Photo from the National Archives (US Signal Corps No. 111-RB-1037).

were fighting an evil war. According to Lifton:

The [gook] syndrome draws upon, but in a basic way violates, Biblical imagery of the scapegoat. The sin [the war] is there, but it is not confronted by the [American] community.... Instead the scapegoat—or gook-victim—is made to bear the unacknowledged guilt of the victimizing community; the human sacrifice is instead performed to appease appetites for killing (those of GIs, company commanders, generals, the Pentagon, the White House, and, as perceived, of possibly still higher powers),...but without convincing inner justification. The gook syndrome thus requires that one kill or otherwise brutalize the scapegoat-victim, but prevents the atonement at the very center of the original scapegoat ritual. Indeed, the compulsive killing of "gooks" can reflect an aberrant substitute for that atonement—a perverse and continuous struggle toward a 'cleansing ritual' that leads only to more blood guilt and still more compulsive killing.¹⁴

As in the Philippines, many Americans who were of African, American Indian, or Asian ancestry also fell victim to the gook syndrome, in part because of the melting-pot myth which required such people to leave



Massacre at My Lai, March 16, 1968. Photo by Ronald Haeberle, from Life Magazine (© 1969 Time, Inc.).

their racial and cultural origins behind in their quest to become truly American.¹⁵

Along with the general unwillingness of most Americans to accept this country's failure in Vietnam, there is an unsurprising reluctance to fully face the racist nature of the American struggle there. The only American film which does begin to come to terms with the racial complexities of the war—*Alamo Bay*—takes place on the gulf coast of Texas. Perhaps this is as it should be, for the tragic events which were enacted in the Philippines and which were then repeated in Vietnam were, after all, written and rehearsed here at home.

The film takes place in a small town called Port Alamo after the war is over. A number of Vietnamese immigrants have settled locally to work in the fishing industry. The opening shot is of a young Vietnamese man, Dinh, holding a small American flag while walking into town. He is given a ride by an American veteran who tells him about the "beautiful women and good drugs" he found in Vietnam. This kind of reception is ordinary, expected, and if the film dealt only with American-Vietnamese relations, animosities, and misunderstandings, it would have accomplished something significant; but the director (Louis Malle) has intentions which are much more complex. Arriving in town, Dinh seeks employment from Wally, a

"Immigration has run off all my good Mexicans." Dinh does not know this, nor does he know the meaning of the letters KKK that he sees written on the side of a building; these are Malle's signals to his audience that the film will concern itself not only with America's problems with Vietnamese immigrants, but with the way these problems are created, recreated and complicated by the history of American racism. Very early in the film, when Dinh, having bought into the Alger myth of individual accomplishment, announces to one of Wally's Mexican-American employees that, like every American, he wants to get rich, the Chicano replies, "This is a gringo bay." Again, Dinh does not understand, just as he does not understand the significance of the fact that he lives in a place called Port Alamo. But if Dinh is as yet ignorant of American history, its consequences will nevertheless be devastating for him.

Dinh's antagonist in *Alamo Bay* is a white fisherman, Shang, who has taken out a bank loan and bought a boat he calls *American Dream Girl*. When we first see Shang, he is wearing a t-shirt with the words "Nam Vets of Texas" printed on the front, and a hat with a Confederate flag sewn on (a second reminder from Malle that we are in the South). Under extreme pressure to pay off his boat, Shang is bitter about the Vietnamese who live in a group of mobile homes near his own. (Shang's wife calls the Vietnamese settlement "slop city".) He feels, as do other white fishermen, that the Vietnamese are taking jobs away from them, and that they are "overgrazing the bay" and endangering the traditional livelihood of Port Alamo's fisherman. Like many veterans, his antagonism toward Dinh is shaped by his own war experience. For Shang, it is as though his enemy has returned to to plague him once again, and is in fact responsible for all his troubles. Because he has never successfully resolved the problems caused by his Vietnam experience, nor those engendered in him by virtue of the fact that he is a white Southerner and a Texan who "remembers the Alamo," Shang simply does not know which way to turn...but he knows who to hate.

Shang's hatred and the hatred of others in the community provides a fertile field for a KKK organizer who shows up to organize the white workers of Port Alamo to drive out the Vietnamese. Charging that their presence is part of a Communist-Catholic plot (the Vietnamese are Catholic) he is at first unsuccessful as the people of Port Alamo attempt to resolve the problem peacefully through discourse. But the town meeting results only in the repetition of clichés previously used to describe blacks and other minorities, and residual animosity over the Vietnam war intrudes as a woman in attendance remarks that, "my boy fought the VC and now they're here taking bread from our mouths." More innocent sounding statements, such as "We just want

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to be American and make a living," reveal the unacknowledged depths of prejudice operating in law abiding citizens. The meeting accomplishes nothing, especially after it is interrupted by Dinh, who demands that something be done about (white) vandals who have damaged his boat.

Actions against the Vietnamese and those perceived as sympathetic to them escalate as garbage is dumped on Wally's lawn by youths, yet nothing is done about it because, as the Sheriff contends, "these kids know that the Vietnamese are driving their dads out of business." There is also a strong sexual component to the harrassment of the Vietnamese, as several white youths taunt Vietnamese schoolgirls, and threaten them with sexual violence. More complex is the relationship between Wally's daughter Glory and Dinh. Shang has become jealous because he has seen Glory (a woman who was once his lover, and with whom he still shares a strong sexual attraction) in conversation with Dinh. Glory reacts angrily to Shang's intimidation tactics, which causes Shang to explode at her: "You Communist cunt, are you going to walk down Main Street with that gook?"

As the people of Port Alamo find themselves more and more involved in their own gook syndrome, random intimidation turns into organized violence. At a meeting, the KKK organizer proclaims that "history is with the white race," and advises the fishermen to use strategy, saying (outrageously) that "we have something to learn about public relations and strategy from Martin Luther King." A veteran answers that what is needed is "a little search and destroy." The result is a flotilla of fishing boats manned by whites whose purpose is to prevent the Vietnamese from fishing the bay, to drive them out of the white man's hunting grounds. On the boats are men dressed in Klan robes; others have shirts with the words "white power" emblazoned on them; some men are dressed in their old army or marine fatigues. On one of the boats, a dummy Asian is hanged in effigy. The men shout in pidgin Vietnamese at Dinh who—irony of ironies—has taken to wearing a cowboy hat and is now armed. Completely outnumbered, Dinh and his friend comply with the orders of the whites and steer their boat out of the bay. Not satisfied with this victory, the whites proceed to burn a cross in front of the Vietnamese settlement while shouting, "White Power—Death to the Cong—Death to the gooks."

Frightened by the tactics of the white citizens of Port Alamo, the Vietnamese decide to leave. The sight of people forced to flee their homes, carrying whatever possessions they can, marching off to an uncertain destination, resonates with images of earlier evacuations: the Cherokees on the Trail of Tears, the relocation of Philippine villagers, and the movement of the Vietnamese from their homes to

"strategic hamlets."

Dinh, however, is not frightened off, and will not abandon his boat and his chance to succeed in a new country. Faced with such obstinacy, Shang and his friends resort to what has become a typical racist final solution to the problem of a recalcitrant minority population. Like those Puritans who burned a Pequot village in 1636, killing hundreds of men, women, and children and beginning a genocidal campaign against the American Indian peoples; like those soldiers in the Philippines who did the same; and like the American troops who burned Vietnamese houses and crops; Shang and others of his mentality make Molotov Cocktails in order to burn the Vietnamese out. They are, however, not completely successful, for as the fire consumes Dinh's boat, and as Shang is preparing to kill Dinh, Glory appears and shoots Shang. In Vietnam, Americans—white and black—deliberately killed other Americans ("fragging") while opponents and supporters of the war fought each other in the streets of America; after the war, Americans are still embroiled in a struggle with themselves and each other, trapped in the confusion and ambivalence of their racist heritage.

Alamo Bay demonstrates that although the Vietnam War is technically over, the gook syndrome still survives; and as long as it does there is the likelihood that American interventions will continue to produce tragedy, both here and abroad, as history repeats itself over and over again.

¹ Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire Building* (New York: Meridian) 1980: 99.

² *Ibid.*: 279.

³ *Ibid.*: 294.

⁴ *Ibid.*: 299.

⁵ *Ibid.*: 314-328.

⁶ *Ibid.*: 318.

⁷ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper) 1980: 308.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*: 307.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 311.

¹¹ *Ibid.*: 312.

¹² *Ibid.*: 313.

¹³ Robert J. Lifton, *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans, Neither Victims Nor Executioners* (New York: Basic Books) 1973: 201.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 201-202.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 204.